

The Mertens' December triple play includes holiday, birthday and adoption day celebrations

In December of 2000 Jeanne Mertens was hospitalized; and in December of 2002 the entire family was in court. A time that might seem like an end of the year curse for Jeanne and Paul Mertens of Belleville, actually was a season comfort and joy.

Caleb Mertens, the couple's first-born child, was due on December 25th 2000. Anxious to meet his family before the holidays; he arrived just a few days early. Twin foster daughters, Crystal and Christine also became legal members of the Mertens family, just days before Christmas 2002. The holidays are a hectic time for most families, but the Mertens have to "really be on their game" to juggle all the special December events for their family.

With the first anniversary of their adoption so close, Christine and Crystal Mertens grinned as they recalled their day at court.

"We got to miss school the entire day and then the judge ordered us to go out and eat ice cream," said 11-year-old Christine.

Not wanting to violate a court order, Paul Mertens said he followed the Judge's directive and took the family bowling and out for ice cream. Next the Mertens proudly sent out the adoption announcement, which included an invitation to an adoption party. However, before the adoption party occurred, the Mertens celebrated Caleb's second birthday and Christmas. The adoption party became December's final celebration.

Family, friends and classmates attended the adoption party. Mr. Mertens proposed a heart-

warming toast that brought everyone in the family to tears. The twins were overjoyed and filled with emotion. They decorated the Christmas tree with ornaments

that bore an inscription of their adoption date. They adored their new bracelets from mom and dad that touted their new initials. The twins had one special request that was yet to be filled. They desperately wanted their ears pierced. Prior to the adoption they would have had to request permission from DCFS, now it was a family decision. The girls were ecstatic when they found out Santa was multi-talented and could also pierce ears.

Last year was the first time the Mertens sent out Christmas cards that featured a picture of the family. The card was a symbol of their family unity and love in their hearts. The family picture and all of the December celebrations, as hectic as they may be, will always be appreciated and fondly remembered.



*Paul, Jeanne, Caleb, Crystal and
Christine Mertens*

Volunteers spread holiday cheer around the Southern Region

In the Southern region, Christmas can start as early as July as volunteers make preparations for holiday celebrations in field offices, with support groups and at private agencies. Below is a small sampling of the hard work and good times that brought holiday cheer to children and their families.

Harrisburg and Metropolis

The annual Christmas parties for Harrisburg and Metropolis Field Office foster families were labors of love for volunteer coordinators Vivian Robinson and Katrina Treat. They spent endless hours putting together the event, which is usually held in a cozy, home-style restaurant with a child-friendly environment. Despite the difficulties of finding such a place, they also find Santa and presents for all the children. The evening concluded with everyone singing Christmas carols.

Mount Vernon

Dorothy Churchwell was another busy Santa. She and her elves (otherwise known as Giving Hands) have for many years faithfully organized a Christmas Dinner for the Mt. Vernon Field Office foster families. After a delicious carry-in dinner, each child received a gift from Santa who visited for the afternoon.

Marion

Carol Sieveking headed up a Christmas dinner/potluck in the Marion Area for the Home Advantage foster family association members. Each child was given an individually wrapped gift from Santa. No child was left out.

Secret Santas visit Catholic Social Services families

Community donations allowed foster children served by Catholic Social Services Belleville, Mt. Vernon and Carbondale offices to experience the true meaning of Christmas. Each year the program accepts donations from individuals and agencies



Santa takes time out of his busy schedule to visit the Catholic Social Services Christmas Party

that sponsor a child, donate a specific gift or contribute to the general program fund. With the support and donations of the community, the children are able to experience an unforgettable Christmas morning. In addition to the gifts, the Mt. Vernon office sponsored a Christmas party with pizza, soft drinks and a preview appearance from Santa!

Caring trees and shopping cops help Lutheran Child and Family Services

In Mt. Vernon, Lutheran Child and Family Services has participated in several goodwill programs throughout the years. For nine years the agency took part in the Angel Tree with the Salvation Army, and in 2002 LCFS started the Caring Tree, hung with the children's nametags and their Christmas wishes. The community was then given the opportunity to make each child's wish come true. Along with the Caring Tree, LCFS had several churches and groups "adopt" families at Christmas to provide for their needs.

The agency also participated in the Jefferson County program, Shop With a Cop. LCFS has been a part of this program for approximately eight years. The Fraternal Order of Police provided children the opportunity to purchase much needed clothing items. The local law enforcement officers accompany the children to Wal-Mart and serve as positive role models for the children. LCFS also furnishes refreshments and Santa Claus visits with the children.

Meet new Southern Region Administrator



Bill Peyton was appointed the Regional Administrator in mid-July. He joined the Department earlier in the year as a Field Office Supervisor. However, his time in social services has been long, with four years as director of behavioral health services at a community mental health center, preceded by several other administrative positions.

In addition to a master's degree in Psychology, Peyton is also a licensed clinical counselor and a certified addiction counselor. Even with his long list of credentials, the people are the part of the equation that interests him the most.

"It's all about relationships and interacting with fellow workers in ways to motivate and inspire each other. Show me someone doing good work and I'm inspired to do better work myself," Peyton said.

So far his favorite part of his job is "working with department personnel to better serve the children and families of Southern Region and all of Illinois for that matter."

Peyton is also committed to working closely with families and getting to know foster parents. He believes that foster and adoptive parents play a critical role in helping the state care for children. The sheer geography of the Southern region can make it a challenging area to be involved in child welfare, sometimes requiring families to travel great distances for children's services and resources. Peyton wants to find out from foster families what they need to do their job and how the region can help.

He was an invited guest at the Regional Foster Parent Advisory Council and looks forward to visiting other support groups. Any associations interested in having Peyton attend a meeting can call him at 993-7100.

Restock school supplies at the new year

Even though it may seem like you just fought the crowds at the back-to-school sales, it is time for another battle. It is likely the pencil sharpeners are lost, the calculator batteries are dead and the book bags are ripped. The holiday break from school is a good time to take inventory and get ready for another round of school. In addition to carting home the supplies, parents can also take steps to keep kids on the right academic track:

- Mark your new calendar with all of the dates for science fairs, days off and other coming events.
- Prepare a home study area stocked with pens, pencils, paper, dictionaries and other supplies.
- Keep a private stash of backup supplies in a secure location (under lock and key if needed).
- Visit the school, ask to check out the child's desk and locker to find all of the permission slips and notices that didn't make it home.
- Make a habit of going through the child's book bag every day.
- Exchange e-mail addresses with the teachers to provide a quick (and documented) way to stay in touch.

OUR KIDS

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Call with foster parent association news and schedules; local training; features on foster families and community

members working for children; photos; and news articles and support all foster families can use.

Southern Region Training

FosterPRIDE In-Service Training

All licensed foster parents and adoptive parents are welcome to attend any or all of the PRIDE In-Service Trainings to enhance their skills and meet yearly training requirements.

Module 1 - *The Foundation for Meeting the Developmental Needs of Children* (Four 3-hour sessions = 12 training hours)

Module 2 - *Using Discipline to Protect and Nurture* (Three 3-hour sessions = 9 training hours)

Module 3 - *Child Development* - New module being written

Module 4 - *Child Sexual Development and Sexual Abuse* (Two 3-hour sessions = 6 training hours)

Module 5 - *Supporting Relationships Between Children and Their Families* (Three 3-hour sessions = 9 training hours)

Module 6 - *Working as a Professional Team Member* (Three 3-hour sessions = 9 training hours)

Module 7 - *Promoting Children's Personal & Cultural Identity* (Two 3-hour sessions = 6 training hours)

Module 8 - *Promoting Permanency Outcomes* (Three 3-hour sessions = 9 training hours)

Module 9 - *Managing the Fostering Experience* (Two 3-hour sessions = 6 training hours)

Module 10 - *Understanding the Effects of Chemical Dependency on Children & Families* (Five 3-hour sessions = 15 training hours)

Marion • 618-536-7751

Module

CARBONDALE - Hampton Inn

Jan. 14, 21 & 28 6:30-9:30 p.m. 2
(Wed)

OLNEY - Richland Memorial Hosp.

Feb. 28, 6:30-9:30 p.m. 5
March 3 & 10 (Wed)

East St. Louis

618-650-3213

Module

FAIRVIEW HEIGHTS - Ramada Inn

March 11, 18 & 6:30-9:30 p.m. 5
25 (Thu)

Pre-registration is required for all classes!
Call the number listed for your area.

Educational Advocacy

Two 3-hour sessions = 6 training

It is mandatory for one foster parent in each family to attend Educational Advocacy Training in order to be re-licensed. Educational Advocacy Training is offered following each Foster PRIDE/Adopt PRIDE training and many additional times. This six hour course covers information foster parents need to know so that they can advocate for their foster children's educational rights and needs.

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CARBONDALE

Feb. 7 (Sat)

Hampton Inn

9 a.m.-4 p.m.

EFFINGHAM

Jan. 24 (Sat)

Hampton Inn

9 a.m.-4 p.m.

MT. VERNON

March 17 & 24 (Wed) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

Hampton Inn

6:30-9:30 p.m.

East St. Louis 618-650-3213

BELLEVILLE

Feb. 3 & 10 (Tue)

Catholic Social Svc.

6:30-9:30 p.m.

FAIRVIEW HEIGHTS

March 11 & 18 (Thu) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

DCFS Office

6:30-9:30 p.m.

March 13 & 20 9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.
(Sat)

Ten Rules for Good Living

1. Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today.
2. Never trouble another for what you can do yourself.
3. Never spend your money before you have it.
4. Never buy something only because it is cheap; it will never be dear to you.
5. Pride costs us more than hunger, thirst, and cold.
6. Never repent of having eaten too little.
7. Nothing is troublesome that we do willingly.
8. Don't let the evils which have never happened cause you pain.
9. Always take things by their smooth handle.
10. When angry, count to ten before you speak; if very angry, count to one hundred.

Thomas Jefferson